

THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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Introduction

Before discussing research in the behavioral sciences on the subject of Japanese religions, a few preliminary remarks are useful about the history and characteristics of the religions of the nation. These introductory remarks intend primarily to help clarify with a minimum of words the nature of various problems of research that concern scholars in the behavioral sciences studying the religions of Japan.

Japan is host to numerous religious traditions that over her long history have merged to form a distinctive composite. Important foreign elements have been Buddhism, Taoism, Confucian learning, and, in recent centuries, Christianity. These have mingled with the native Shinto so that today only the rare historian of religion can identify the historic provenance of many individual religious elements. The processes of syncretism did not run a full course, however, but were arrested at the level of popular usage by a division of labor so that Japanese citizens today continue to distinguish between the two main religious streams of Buddhism and Shinto. For the most part, the roles of Buddhism as they are seen by the average citizen concern death, the hereafter, and ancestors, whereas Shinto observances relate to other realms and problems of human life. The tendency toward religious syncretism is nevertheless strongly evident in the teaching of many modern religious sects of Japan and, notably, in the general religious tolerance of the Japanese people, who typically see all religions as being essentially alike. Religious syncretism has not prevented the growth of religious sects, and modern Japan, with over 400 legally chartered religious organizations, is probably the world's most remarkable example of sectarianism.

The two tendencies of mutual adjustment of religious traditions and the proliferation of sects are among the most outstanding traits of Japanese religious history. Another noteworthy trend has been a progressive decline on a national level in sect membership and in participation in religious activities in general, a trend that probably began in the Meiji era a century ago but became truly conspicuous only after the end of World War II. The long established religious organizations of Japan, both Buddhist and Shinto, are deeply troubled today by lack of active members and, concomitantly, by lack of funds. In the face of a general turning away from organized

religions and a decline in informal religious practices of the home, postwar Japan has also seen a remarkable growth of new religious sects. Among the approximately 150 sects existing today that were formed or first rose to prominence after the end of the war, only a very small number are large and powerful. It is among these that the most intense religious activity of the nation is presently conducted.

Resources for the Analytic Study of Japanese Religions

It is not possible to make an appraisal of the breadth and depth of recorded materials on Japanese religions beyond the statement that the amount of data is unquestionably vast and principally locked in the Japanese language. It consists almost wholly of writings that modern social scientists would call descriptive data. Such use as is made of them will undoubtedly be left principally to Japanese scholars. Since the nineteenth century, descriptive accounts in English and other European languages have also been fairly abundant, and it is probable that the scholarly world outside Japan had a clearer general picture of the religious state of the nation before World War II than it has today. But this picture was principally descriptive rather than analytic; that is, most writings by Japanese scholars and by Westerners have been the works of religious philosophers, Christian missionaries, and other scholars who lacked training in the social sciences. Postwar publications still come principally from scholars with the same interests and backgrounds, but the social sciences have in some measure been incorporated into their thinking.

Among Japanese scholars the sociological study of religion began about as early as it did in the West (Morioka 1968: 4). The writings of Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber were rapidly translated into Japanese and tended to dominate sociological thought concerning religion. They did not, however, stimulate much empirical research, and the number of Japanese sociologists specializing in religion was and is today small. It was the study of folk ethnology by such scholars as Kunio Yanagida before World War II which provided the original groundwork for numerous empirical studies of religion, generally of small scope, that began to appear after the end of the war (Morioka 1968: 6). The number of Japanese scholars of religion in various disciplines today is substantial, and some of these are professional behavioral scientists or have received training in the behavioral sciences. Although the bulk of their writings continues to be descriptive, it often today describes religious acts rather than dogma, and provides a rich body of useful data.

A substantial number of Japanese organizations concerned with various aspects of research on religion also exist. Among these is the International Institute for the Study of Religion, established after World War II, which has actively sponsored research by both Japanese and Western scholars. The numerous publications of this institute must be described generally as

works of value that only peripherally incorporate the aims, views, and goals of the behavioral sciences. The Religious Affairs Section (Shumuka) of the national Ministry of Education, a bureau which in prewar years exercised firm control over the religious organizations of the nation, is today in considerable part a research institute and documentary organ publishing writings in both the Japanese and English languages. These include annual compilations of religious statistics (Shukyo Nenkan) and various special studies that tend increasingly to follow the lines of thought of the social sciences (see, for example, Mombusho Chosakyoku Shumuka 1962). Scholarly societies and journals concerned with the study of religion also actively exist, for example, Nihon Shukyo Gakkai, publishers of the journal *Shukyo Kenkyu*. Various religious sects and federations also maintain research bureaus or support research and, although these endeavors are ultimately directed towards religious goals, the published results have value for the social scientist.¹

If these various researches by Japanese scholars are appraised critically, it may fairly be said that they make available many relevant data, if often for practical purposes only to scholars in Japan. From the standpoint of the behavioral sciences, only a relatively few are analytic or interpretive. Expectably, studies of Japanese religions by Western scholars have been much less abundant. If discussion is limited to scholars in the behavioral sciences, we may note that most today are American, that almost all of their research has been conducted since the end of World War II, and that the distribution by discipline is remarkably uneven. About two-thirds are anthropologists and scarcely any are psychologists. Among the anthropologists, only a few have shown a special interest in religion, although all who have conducted community studies in Japan have as a matter of course included descriptions and discussions of religion in their writings. Among Western sociologists, specialists in Japanese religions have been even fewer, and we know of no such specialist among the few psychologists who study Japan. Among available data compiled by or under the direction of Westerners oriented toward the social sciences are the extensive records of the Religious Affairs Section of the American military occupation forces, data which are now being summarized for publication (Woodard, in preparation).

RESEARCH TOPICS IN THE BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

As an organizing scheme for discussion, we shall use the topics *The New Religious Sects*, *The Established Religions*, and *General Subjects*. The discussion which follows will concern principally interpretive studies conducted by scholars in the fields represented by this conference and other studies of special interest to them. A recent publication (Morioka and

Newell 1968) provides a useful, selected bibliography of outstanding works in Japanese and English that relate to the sociological study of Japan's religions.

The New Religious Sects

Studies of Japanese religions conducted since the end of World War II have emphasized the newly established sects, one of the most conspicuous social developments of postwar times. In particular, the mushroom growth of Soka Gakkai and its activities in politics and other secular realms have been stimulants to study. The growth of the new sects became the subject of both popular and scholarly writings in Japan. From this interest have emerged many books and articles by Japanese scholars that fall well within the theoretical frameworks of the social sciences.² This subject was also taken up tardily in the 1960's by a few American scholars. Information on the large new sects, principally Soka Gakkai, has also been amplified by sectarian writings of established Buddhist sects that felt imperiled by the growth of the new sects.

A summary of these studies tells us several things about the sects, their teachings, adherents, and the basis of their appeal. They are religions of the people, organizations founded but today not necessarily led by charismatic leaders. The sects operate principally through the efforts of lay members, who are generally drawn from the lower economic and social strata of the nation. Membership is attractive because of the emotional rewards it offers, especially through faith healing and social identification with like-minded fellows seeking affect in a rapidly changing society. Major factors influencing social changes of the nation have been the weakening or loss of traditional human ties of kin and small community under conditions of modernization and urbanization.

The appeal of the new sects is seen also to depend in part upon the rigidity of the older established sects, which have failed to meet the changed social conditions of modern times. The successful new sects are then those which are exceptionally well adapted in organizational features, exceptionally effective social units making a skillful balance in meeting organizational goals and the needs of individual members. In doing so, they have made use of traditional social binders, such as small group meetings, while at the same time maintaining organizational flexibility that fosters coherence together with added growth. Hierarchical lines of authority are balanced by horizontal lines of egalitarian membership in part through the use of only very few professional personnel. The largest new sects are those which most skillfully counterpoise vertical-hierarchical ties between sub-units and horizontal or peer-like ties within and between units without excessive dependence upon the personal charisma of individual leaders. Essentially traditional dogma is offered in organizationally altered but nevertheless

recognizably traditional form to citizens for whom the traditional beliefs and social forms, once thus reorganized, are appealing and otherwise not readily available in modern Japan. The new sects are thus seen as simultaneous examples of continuity and discontinuity (Norbeck, 1970).

The Established Religions

According to Japanese thought, the "established religions" (*kisei shukyo*) are those to which age or other attributes have given a patina of prestige. Buddhist sects operating with a professional class of priests are "established" even when, as has happened often enough since the end of World War II, the sects are recently chartered fissionary offshoots of old sects. Ancient shrine Shinto is also established, but the sects of Shinto, which first arose as religions of the people in the nineteenth century, tend to be regarded by the Japanese citizenry as "new." Prevailing scholarly opinion regards the nineteenth-century Shinto or quasi-Shinto sects as forerunners of the host of postwar sects with similar dogma. Christian sects, none of which has had a legal existence of more than about a century and some of which are newer than the "new sects," are ordinarily regarded as established sects despite their youth. The classification *kisei shukyo* may then be seen to rest upon combined criteria of age and social prestige, a circumstance that incidentally informs us of the low social prestige of the new sects.

Postwar publications make amply clear that the established religions are beset today with problems of attracting and holding adherents and that they suffered great financial losses during and after World War II as a result of the land reform which took away property, war damage, and, most importantly, the loss of adherents in a society with changing values. The primary social significance of Buddhism has long been seen as lying in its ties with ancestor worship in a society stressing ties of family and kinship (see, for example, Smith 1966), and the primary social strength of traditional Shinto as stemming from the communal ties it fostered and reinforced through practices of communal worship of tutelary gods and other joint ritual of the kin group and community. Studies of social change in Japan tell us better than studies of religion that the progressive modernization and urbanization of the nation have made it increasingly difficult for the established religions to serve their traditional functions and, in part, meaninglessly to try to do so.

Various Japanese writings inform that some attempts have been made by the established religious organizations, both Buddhist and Shinto, to revamp and democratize their organizational structures and their activities in adjustment to modern conditions of life. A few especially noteworthy studies pinpoint specific problems of organization. These include a self-study by one of the most vigorous Buddhist sects, Soto-shu (Hozokan Henshubu 1961), and an elaborate study of the geographical distribution of temples

and shrines in major cities of the nation which concludes that the distribution is generally inefficient and otherwise inadequate in the cities with their swollen populations (Kawasaki et al, eds. 1959; Kashikuma et al, eds. 1961). A detailed sociological study of the still powerful Shin sect of Buddhism (Morioka 1962) relates its structure and activities to the Japanese family system and to practices of sect endogamy.

These various studies are informative but their scope is seldom great, and none can be called a complete or detailed study of the present state of the established religions. Christianity has similarly been the subject of few interpretive studies, although formal statistical and historic records of Christian church activities are fairly well maintained by the religious bodies themselves. We have long been told in passing that, although unimportant from the standpoint of the number of its adherents, Christianity has had great influence upon Japanese religion and culture. Clear documentation or other firm support of this seemingly reasonable contention has been given only exceptionally (e.g., Kishimoto, ed. 1958).

General Subjects

Japanese and Western writings that attempt to deal with the entire realm of Japanese religious life are outdated. The most recent attempt in Japanese at a comprehensive interpretation of the social functions of Japanese religions (Hori 1962) is principally a restatement of the traditional functions of the nation's religions. A recent study (Norbeck 1970) deals with the established religions and Confucianism principally as data essential to an interpretation of the nature and success of the new sects.

Various studies of religion published since the end of World War II have, however, cut across sectarian lines to deal with religion in a generic sense. The Japanese nation has shown a remarkable, reflexive interest in its own views of religion. Postwar years have seen a rash of surveys of religious attitudes conducted by scholars, governmental agencies, and newspapers. The nation has also been interested in noting its beliefs and practices of folk supernaturalism that fall outside the boundaries of conventional religion and has conducted nationwide surveys of this subject. These surveys tell us of the progressive national decline in sect membership that we have already noted, that most citizens view religion as desirable but are not moved to become active members of any present sect, and that folk beliefs of supernaturalism are waning but still abundant. Some of these surveys also point to social correlates of waning religious activities, such as changed conceptions of familial relations.

Motivation toward achievement among the Japanese has been the subject of one well-known interpretation, following the ideas of Max Weber, which sees religion as being functionally related to the Japanese analogue of the Protestant ethic (Bellah 1957). More recent studies of achievement motiva-

tion, however, have concerned familial relations in Japan (DeVos 1968) and still broader aspects of the ordering of Japanese society (Norbeck 1970: ch. VII).

PROBLEMS OF ANALYSIS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our present state of knowledge of the religions of Japan may be summarized in the statements that many descriptive, historic data are available, especially on the subject of dogma, but that these have at best received little interpretive use in a scientific sense and have never been adequately summarized; few interpretive studies of large scale have been made which concern modern circumstances; descriptive and interpretive studies of the new sects are more abundant than studies of the established religious bodies of today; and, in general, the social-scientific study of Japan's religions remains an open field.

Three broad, general topics appear particularly desirable for future research: the relation of religious ideals to behavior; the social organization of religious groups; and the changing functions of religious beliefs and acts. Under these topics are subsumed many subjects of smaller scope which have been omitted from discussion here for lack of space.

Referring to the first of our general topics, we may observe that studies describing the religious beliefs and practices of the common man remain few. As Spiro (1966: 1169) has observed, this deficiency leads to problems of analysis, since official dogma and the meaning of religion to the people are not the same. Recent studies of Japanese religion (e.g., Wimberly 1969) bring out clearly the disparity between views and acts of members of sects and official doctrinal views of those sects.

As social units, a type of common-interest association, the religious bodies of Japan may be seen as "natural" experiments in organizational efficiency. To understand them as social groups, much more information is needed about their internal organization and activities, especially of the established religious sects. We may note that research on the new sects, which we have labeled as relatively well described, has strongly centered on the few large sects. The many small sects are essentially unknown, to Japanese as well as to foreign scholars. Comparative study of the kind suggested here offers illumination of many aspects or facets of social organization, including patterns of authority, fissionary processes, decision-making, the roles of personal charisma, and class differences as related to religion. Such studies should also direct attention to parallels in other kinds of social units, such as the family, business concerns, and secular common-interest associations, that may be seen as analogues of or models for the religious associations.

The problems of research discussed in the two foregoing paragraphs have important bearing on what seems to us the subject of greatest interest, the

functions of religion in Japanese society. Evidence is conclusive that the functions have changed but that there is continuity as well as discontinuity so that the process of change has never been revolutionary. The extent of change remains uncertain, however, and trends of change that might be expected in the future are unclear.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, the following: *Japanese Religions*, Journal of the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, Kyoto; Hozokan Henshubu, hen, *Koza, Kindai Bukkyo*, 1961, vol. 5 of which reports the results of a self-analysis of the Soto sect of Buddhism; the various publications concerning Shinto in the serial *Kokugakuin Daigaku Nihon Bunka Kenkyusho Kiyo*; and publications of the Study Committee of Christianity and Social Problems, and the Institute for the Study of Humanities and Social Sciences, Doshisha University, Kyoto.

2. For example, see the writings, principally in the Japanese language, of Ichiro Hori, Fujio Ikado, Iichi Oguchi, Akio Saki, and Hiro Takagi.

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